

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FIVE

Vikki Barbero, Chair

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Wally Rubin, District Manager

June 12, 2020

Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Corey Johnson
Speaker
New York City Council
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Re: *Community Board Five post-COVID-19 urban planning response*

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Johnson:

At the regularly scheduled monthly Community Board Five meeting on Thursday, June 11, 2020, the following resolution passed with a vote of 44 in favor; 0 opposed; 1 abstaining:

WHEREAS, The COVID-19 pandemic hit New York City with one of the biggest public health crises of all time, instigating a massive economic and fiscal crisis, and potentially triggering more negative consequences for human life, well-being and economic strength; and

WHEREAS, Cities are deeply affected by the virus in all aspects of their operations, including transportation, health care, hospital resources, housing, infrastructure and land use; and

WHEREAS, The pandemic has evolved into an urban crisis that will force cities, and New York City in particular, to reconsider their approach to land use and planning; and

WHEREAS, New York City became the epicenter of the pandemic in the US with 204,576 cases to date and has brought to light existing deficiencies as well as weaknesses due to the very nature of our fabric and past policies; and

WHEREAS, New York City needs to re-examine its role and responsibility in a post-COVID world, and also draw the conclusions of the impact of 20 years of planning policies that have left our communities vulnerable; and

WHEREAS, As New York gears up to adapt and recover from the harm and disruption caused by COVID-19, we must adapt our city with resilience as a driving principle; and

WHEREAS, Urban resilience demands good urban planning, but for 20 years, our core midtown district was left to develop with no direction other than market pressures, while allowing for hospitals and historic buildings to be demolished to make way for high-end residential buildings, allowing ultra-luxury supertall towers to sprout south of Central Park, letting our parks to be plunged in the dark, and our subways and schools to be overcrowded; and

WHEREAS, Paradoxically, the lack of planning policies let midtown become densely built, but sparsely occupied, with a 13% residential vacancy rate in Community Board Five (9% city average), a staggeringly high 20.6% residential vacancy rate in Midtown, reaching a sickening 34.1% vacancy rate in core midtown from 42nd to 59th Street and an obscene 40.6% for the two census tracts that border Central Park. (Source: New York City Population FactFinder); and

WHEREAS, At the peak of the pandemic, it was disturbing to see supertall luxury condo towers entirely dark, deserted, while in contrast, our first responders and health care workers had to brave long commutes to come and care for the acutely sick; and

WHEREAS, Chronic double-digit residential vacancy will hurt the district's resilience; and

WHEREAS, Community Board Five believes that a municipality's priority is to carefully craft and consider planning decisions that benefit its communities; and

WHEREAS, The Department of City Planning, over the past decade, has been adamant that it should not influence what midtown should look like but, rather, should let the market decide, going as far as excluding our district from laws against the nefarious mechanical voids, letting our parks linger in permanent shadows, letting developers build residential buildings designed to be vacant; and

WHEREAS, Planning, deciding how our land should be utilized, and envisioning how our district and our city should grow and develop are the noble and necessary missions of a government well run, it is a mandate of any city and municipality, and one New York once pioneered in imposing zoning to protect light and air more than a century ago; and

WHEREAS, To overcome the many challenges our district and our city are facing, we need to return to principles of rational planning and zoning, and reclaim a city that is efficient and that preserves and utilizes its resources in a smart and sustainable way; and

WHEREAS, After years of poor planning policies, the current and future administration must resume their mandate and involve community planners, leaders and advocacy groups in their effort to plan a post-pandemic resilient NYC; therefore be it

RESOLVED, Community Board Five demands that the administration, the Department of City Planning and other city agencies reconnect with the core principles of their mission, and tackle post-COVID planning with recovery and resilience as guiding principles; and be it further

RESOLVED, The administration, current and future, must involve community planners, leaders and advocacy groups in their effort to plan a post-pandemic resilient NYC.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this matter.

Sincerely,



Vikki Barbero
Chair



Layla Law-Gisiko
Acting Chair, Land Use, Housing and Zoning Committee

Cc: Hon. Brad Hoylman
Hon. Liz Krueger
Hon. Richard Gottfried
Hon. Carlina Rivera
Hon. Keith Powers
Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Dermot Shea, Commissioner, NYPD
Polly Trottenberg, Commissioner, NYC DOT
Sarah Feinberg, Interim President, MTA-NYC